

## ***The Journal Record***

# **Legal Aid Services launches its first fund-raiser**

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During tough economic times, more charities ask for money and those with money have less to give. Today, those with generous hearts are seeking out causes with the ability to generate big results for each dollar spent.

According to Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma, donations to Legal Aid can tackle poverty, child abuse, child delinquency, housing problems, elder abuse, unemployment, marital problems, scam artists and more, all in one shot. Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma officially launched its first fund-raiser, "Campaign for Legal Aid: Access to Justice," on Law Day, May 1.

Nearly half a million Oklahomans qualify for free civil legal help because their income falls below the U.S. poverty level (about \$18,000 a year for a household of four). However, Legal Aid currently has the staffing and budget to provide one attorney for every 8,200 of these people. By contrast, in the general population, there is one attorney for every 250 people.

To try and close the gap, Legal Aid is launching its very first fund drive. Two Legal Aid organizations serving the western and eastern halves of the state merged in 2001, said Gayla Machell, director of marketing and development for Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma. This fund drive is the first for the new statewide organization.

Jimmy Goodman, an attorney with Crowe & Dunlevy who is co-chairing the campaign with attorney Jerry Durbin, spoke about the campaign at the Law Day Luncheon at the Cox Business Services Convention Center on Thursday.

Statewide Campaign Chair Bill Paul, also an attorney with Crowe & Dunlevy and former president of the American Bar Association, is writing a letter to 11,000 attorneys asking them to pledge an amount equal to one or two billable hours of their work.

"We raised less than \$40 per lawyer for Legal Aid during our best year," Goodman told the group. The campaign has set \$1.5 million as a three-year goal. So far, lead gifts total \$345,000.

Legal Aid provides free legal services to two populations traditionally underserved: low-income families and the elderly. Legal Aid only takes on civil cases (no class-action lawsuits, no suits against the government, and no cases involving drugs or other criminal activities). More than half of all the cases Legal Aid handles deal with family law, such as child support, custody and domestic abuse.

The next largest portion of Legal Aid cases - 15 percent - deal with consumer protection.

For instance, Legal Aid helped Henry, an old man snookered into signing away his house because he couldn't read the contract a repair man shoved under his nose. Confronted by Legal Aid attorneys, the contractors abandoned their attempts to take Henry's home.

Legal Aid also provides free legal help on issues such as housing, income maintenance, employment, health and a variety of others.

An estimated 85 to 90 percent of Legal Aid cases are settled out of court, helping to reduce costs and keep the judicial caseload down (without representation, each of these individuals would have to represent themselves). Of the cases that do go to court, 90 percent are successful - a good indication that Legal Aid does not take on frivolous cases.

Last year, each Legal Aid case that was closed cost an average of \$349 (that breaks down to a legal services rate of \$31.46 an hour).

The 2003 budget for Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma is \$6.8 million. The organization gets assistance from Congress, interest on the Lawyer's Trust Fund, the state, Oklahoma City, and a variety of government grants. Legal Aid is supported by several local United Ways, and also relies on private gifts from individuals, law firms, corporations and foundations.

Legal Aid serves all 77 counties in Oklahoma, operating 11 law centers and eight satellite offices. The staff includes 51 full-time attorneys, 13 part-time attorneys, 18 paralegals and 43 clerical and support staff. That relatively small group managed to close more than 20,000 cases last year.